

# Crisis in Caribbean

## Time of Testing for

### New President

This is the sixth of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

#### "A TIME OF TESTING: CRISES IN THE CARIBBEAN"

I had been concerned about the Dominican Republic from the day I took office, and indeed well before that time. The Dominicans had lived for thirty years under the iron-fisted rule of dictator Leonidas Trujillo. During those years, which ended with Trujillo's assassination in 1961, those who opposed Trujillo had three choices: to go into exile, to go underground, or to remain quiet. Most Dominicans had chosen the third course.

The three decades of Trujillo's rule had left the Dominican people in poverty. Worse, it had left them with no progressive political or social leadership. A few Dominicans had made careers of political opposition and criticism from abroad, but they had little constructive to offer their people in the way of practical plans or programs. There were many who still regarded the gun and the knife as legitimate tools of politics. The spirit of freedom and the habit of political cooperation, on which economic and social progress is so dependent, were almost totally lacking on the Dominican scene. This weakness, unless rapidly corrected, promised chronic instability in the Dominican Republic.

Just beyond the horizon lay Cuba and Castro. The Communist leader in Havana was always alert to any exploitable weakness among his neighbors. He was promoting subversion in many countries in the Western Hemisphere, and we knew he had his eye on the Dominican Republic. He had already backed one attempted guerrilla invasion of that country during the Trujillo years, and he was likely to try again if he thought he could succeed. Some Dominicans were undergoing guerrilla and sabotage training in Cuba.

We were encouraged in 1962 when the Dominican people held their first free elections in recent times. I carried the best wishes of the American people to Santo Domingo that year when I

attended the inauguration of the newly elected President, Juan Bosch, as President Kennedy's personal representative. However, conversations with Bosch had raised new concerns in my mind. He was an intelligent, pleasant man with an attractive personality, and he was full of ideals, but it was my impression that he had no solid plans for overcoming the profound problems his country faced. Nor did I think he had the experience, the imagination, or the strength needed to put whatever plans he might have into effect.

Nevertheless, we wished Bosch well and did everything in our power to help him and his duly elected government succeed. With John Bartlow Martin in Santo Domingo as American Ambassador, Bosch had as sympathetic a representative of the United States as a new leader in a difficult position could have. We continued to hope that Bosch would be able to do for his people what President Romulo Betancourt had done for Venezuela after dictatorship had been overthrown there.

A military junta overthrew Bosch in September 1963. This was a major setback for our common hopes.

The temporary regime was headed by former Foreign Minister Donald Reid y Cabral, a moderate who had been abroad when the coup was carried out. Reid was fairly popular and was regarded as an honest man, but he faced difficult problems.

Reid suspected, with good reason, that a number of Dominican army officers were plotting his overthrow in the spring of 1965. He decided to move against them before their plans were completed.

From Camp David I remained in close touch by phone with Secretaries Rusk and McNamara and with McGeorge Bundy, who had gone to the White House Situation Room to follow developments. I decided that we must take precautions in case we had to evacuate American citizens from the Dominican Republic. At midmorning on Sunday, April 25, we ordered the Atlantic Fleet to move ships toward Santo Domingo. The ships were to remain out of sight of land but to stand

A few hours later we instructed our Embassy to contact authorities on both sides of the conflict and tell them we planned to evacuate Americans and others who wished to leave the country. We requested a cease-fire and the cooperation of the "loyalists" and the "rebels" to help us carry out this movement peacefully. We also hoped that such a cease-fire would permit the warring parties to get together and begin negotiating a settlement. But there was too much confusion and passions were running too high to get this kind of agreement quickly.

The situation in the streets of the Dominican capital was alarming. Our Embassy reported that guns had been passed out at random—many to Communist organizers, who were putting them into the hands of their followers; others to thugs and criminals, the so-called Tigres. Young boys of twelve and thirteen were swaggering around the streets with machine guns over their shoulders. Stores and houses were being looted.

Processing of evacuees continued through the night and the early hours of April 27 at the Embajador Hotel.

Some rioters entered the hotel and ran around the lobby and through the corridors brandishing their weapons and terrifying the women and children gathered there. Other rebels remained outside and began shooting their guns into the air and into the upper floors of the hotel, where a number of American families were staying. We were dealing not with an army but with a trigger-happy mob with little experience and no discipline. It was a miracle that no one was killed in this incident.

I realized then that we might have to use our own forces to protect American lives in this situation. I discussed this with McNamara, and he assured me that Marines were available from the task force sent to carry out the evacuation. Additional forces had been alerted in case of need.

That same day, Tuesday, April 27, produced a critical juncture in the Dominican revolt. Regular army forces with tanks and infantry under General Wessin started to move across the Duarte Bridge over the Ozama River